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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000628

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL DEBATE, VIETNAMESE STYLE: THE PUBLIC
COMMENTS ON ROLE, FUTURE OF COMMUNIST PARTY

REF: A. HANOI 30

[1](#)B. HCMC 229

[1](#)C. HANOI 11

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Classified By: Ambassador Michael W. Marine per 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and Comment: The public's response to the call for comments on the Communist Party's draft Political Report has been enthusiastic and, by Vietnamese standards, refreshingly open. Many commentators have taken on overtly political issues, expressing dissatisfaction with the Party's methods for selecting its leadership and concern about the Party's overarching role in politics and society. While the Party has no doubt tacitly approved this "debate" as a way to further its stated goal of creating a more "open and democratic" Party, the discussions' vigor, and some of the sharper comments, may have come as a shock to some. Although the openness on display has been modest, the debate and the public's enthusiasm for it are welcome and may portend further gains in the future. End Summary and Comment.

[1](#)2. (C) In preparation for its 10th Congress, in January the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) released for public comment its draft Political Report (Ref A). From February 1 to March 1, the Vietnamese public, from ordinary citizens to former and current high-ranking officials, offered their thoughts on the draft report. Much of the commentary focused on the need for the Party to redouble its efforts to tackle corruption, improve Vietnam's education system and integrate Vietnam into the international system, including by joining the WTO. However, in some cases, the public commentary went beyond the draft report and addressed the role and future of the CPV. In what have often been provocative -- and, not so long ago, probably seditious -- comments, many have expressed discomfort with the state of politics in Vietnam. Public enthusiasm for the discussion has been pronounced, and conversations with our local contacts invariably turn towards this "political debate."

[1](#)3. (C) Notably, the public commentary submitted to print newspapers, online forums and directly to the Party itself has reflected the following:

- Dissatisfaction with the method of selecting Party leadership;
- Concern about the Party's role in Vietnamese politics and society;
- Support for allowing Party members to engage in capitalist economic activities; and,
- Thoughts on how the Party could improve its stature among the people.

14. (SBU) Among the more outspoken political commentators has been Nguyen Trung, a member of the Prime Minister's Research Council. In a three-part series run in HCMC-based "Tuoi Tre" (Youth) newspaper, Trung criticized the Party's broken system of appointing and promoting cadres. This system prevents the Party from bringing in more talented people and "fosters loopholes and redundancy that in turn nurture degradation and corruption." Party officials merely focus on tying themselves firmly to the "Party boat" and pay no attention to where the boat is heading, or even how to ensure it will not sink. Trung went on to argue that, given the Party's existing methods of appointing leaders, poor personnel choices damage Vietnam's national interests by interfering with solid policy decisions. Several examples of this are Vietnam's late entry into ASEAN, its delayed signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement and now its slow accession to the WTO, Trung asserted.

Distorted Role of Party

15. (SBU) Some public comments have criticized the overarching role of the Party in politics and society. For example, Nguyen Trung wrote that the National Assembly -- which is ostensibly an independent branch of government -- is often referred to as an agency working for the Politburo. According to Trung, one should not misconstrue the concept of "the Party in power" to "the Party that holds all power." In fact, neither Vietnam's current Constitution, nor the Party's statutes, allows this. Successful ruling parties in many countries, particularly developed ones, have been able to deal with this issue because they clearly distinguish between the Party and the State. "The Party and State should not be intertwined. Everybody must work according to the

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Constitution," Trung stressed. Also according to Trung, given Vietnam's current system of one-party rule, mass organizations must be able to become true and competent representatives of people from different strata of society, instead of being treated as the Party's "extended arms."

16. (SBU) Both the relatively progressive Tuoi Tre -- which has positioned itself out in front of this political discussion (Ref B) -- and online newspaper VietnamNet.com.vn continue to give extensive coverage to public and elite reactions to Trung's comments. Tuoi Tre reported that more than half of the comments it has received from readers have been in response to Trung's articles. Based on our own informal survey of VietnamNet, a significant amount of the online correspondence it has received deals with Trung's thoughts, and most have voiced support.

Party Should Welcome Capitalists

17. (SBU) Public reactions to the draft Political Report have also addressed the proposed revisions of CPV statutes that would allow Party members to participate in (heretofore "exploitative") capitalist activities (Ref C). Tran Dang Tuan, standing Director General of Vietnam Television, commented that if the Party does not allow its members to engage in capitalist or private economic activities, it cannot justify its current policies regarding national economic development. "If the Party's policy is to encourage only non-Party members to engage in economic activities, one cannot help but think that this policy is merely one of convenience, while in fact the Party still considers private economic activities to be unsavory. One could conclude that there is still the possibility that capital goods or assets might be nationalized at some point in the future," Tuan surmised.

¶8. (SBU) In separate published commentary, Tran Van Tho, a lecturer at Waseda University in Japan, argued that, in a multi-party system, citizens can choose to follow the party that best represents their interests. However, in a one-party system, because citizens have no choice, discrimination against any element in society is unjust and immoral. Given the current significant contributions of Vietnam's private sector, if the Party were to continue to prevent both capitalists from becoming Party members and Party members from engaging in capitalist activities, then it would seem that the CPV's ultimate goal is to get rid of capitalism, which would be harmful to the Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) process.

Strengthen the Party...By Allowing An Opposition?

¶9. (SBU) In Vietnam, criticism of the Party is often couched in constructive suggestions for strengthening it and bolstering its supremacy. Some of the public commentary over the past few weeks has been no exception. Nguyen Quang A, President of VP Bank, wrote that if the CPV truly believes that socialism means a "rich people, strong country and a just, democratic and civilized society," and if it were able to come up with specific plans to realize this motto, it would undoubtedly be able to attract many more members. It would win the public's support, and the common people would wholeheartedly follow it, "unless another party exists that strives for the same goals and proves to be much more effective at realizing them." He goes on to argue that opposition forces should be encouraged to participate in the cause of national development if the Party and "all those involved" can agree upon common values in and objectives for a prosperous and democratic society.

Party Stalwarts Respond

¶10. (SBU) Showing that Party loyalists have not been asleep at the switch, former Politburo member Nguyen Duc Binh expressed his opposition to Party members' participation in capitalist activities. Binh quoted Ho Chi Minh as saying that Party members must not participate in exploitative activities and called on the Party to continue the path toward socialism that it has chosen. Any support for "a so-called 'transition' in terms of Party membership" is akin to "supporting political pluralism," he argued. Many letters to the editor received by VietnamNet disagreed with Binh's view. Readers specifically criticized Binh for being too academic, inflexible and subjective, and for ignoring current trends.

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Political Discussion Not Ready for Primetime?

¶10. (SBU) Although the period for public comment on the draft Political Report officially ended on March 1, the public discussion has continued, even making it to live television. During a March 5 talk show on VTV, both Nguyen Quang A and Nguyen Trung called on the Party to facilitate true freedom of expression to allow for genuine public discussion of critical national issues. However, according to a contact in VTV's News Department, the CPV's Commission for Ideological and Cultural Affairs expressed its "discomfort" with the show. VTV canceled a subsequent re-airing of the program and, when the Embassy asked VTV for a copy of the tape, we were refused.

Comment: What's Going On?

¶11. (C) While impressive by Vietnamese standards, and refreshing to those used to monotonic expressions of unwavering support for the Party, the political "debate"

taking place most likely has the Party's tacit approval. The CPV has made clear its goal of becoming a more "open" and "democratic" party to broaden its public appeal. To that end, the Party may revise its statutes to transform itself from a "vanguard of the working class" to a "representative of the interests of the whole nation." In this light, while the vigor of the public discussions, and perhaps some of the commentators' sharper comments, may have come as a shock to Party leadership, the discussion itself likely has not.

¶12. (C) How and to what extent the public commentary is reflected in the final Political Report and the upcoming Party Congress remain to be seen. That said, the tone of the discussions, the buzz on the street and the public's enthusiasm for the debate are all welcome. Even the modest openness on display is a good thing and may portend further gains in the future.

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